

[Dunnell #12]

Mr. G. O. Dunnell - Hay, Grain and Feed Man Paper 12

STATE MASSACHUSETTS

NAME OF WORKER ROBERT WILDER

ADDRESS NORTHFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

SUBJECT LIVING LORE

NAME OF INFORMANT G. O. DUNNELL

ADDRESS NORTEFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

DATE OF INTERVIEW June 12, 1939

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Name: Robert Wilder

Title: Living Lore

Assignment: Northfield

Topic: G. O. Dunnell - Hay, Grain and Feed Man Paper 12

I was working in the little plot that we call "the garden" putting in some squash seeds when Mr. Dunnell happened by on his way to his "office". Without wasting time on a preliminary greeting, he began:

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"Yer don't want to plant squash nor punkin seeds too deep. Just give 'em enough dirt to cover 'em and they'll grow. And the more manure they is around the better. Don't need to worry about 'burning' them and all that scientific clap trap.

"Louis [Webber?], him that runs the Belding farm on Great Medder is a scientific feller. Went to the state agricultural college where they learned him to do things jest so. But I notice he leaves his machinery out to rust just the same as if he never went to no agricultural college. He figgered one year that there was going to be money in squashes. I will say that he figgered it out right. They learned him that much. But he didn't make no money. He set the Beldings back good and plenty and dumb near lost his job.

"I heard he was going to put all them acres into squashes so I went down one day to watch 'em work plantin'. They was a feller went ahead with a stick that he jabbed into the ground every so often. And his job was to do that. And to keep in a straight line across the field. Then come a feller with a bag of seed. He dropped one seed in each hole. That was all he did. Behind him come another feller with another bag of 2 seed to give to the plantin' feller when he needed it. And his job was to kick dirt inter the holes and step on it. I watched the feller jabbing. He was jabbin' holes three inches deep. I sez to Louis, 'Ain't yer plantin' them seed too deep?' 'No.' he says, 'They're plantin' jest right.'

"'Well, Mister.' I says, 'the society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Seeds, or Squashes, or suntin' ought to get after you. Here you be plantin' them poor seeds three inches under ground. And then, as if that 't wan't enough work for 'em to climb out, what do you do, by G- but tamp 'em in their graves! They'll never be able to get out - not one in a hundred. Yer couldn't do it yerself,' I says, 'Get planted in the ground way over yer head.' I says, 'And have somebody tamp down the ground and you get out. Yer're expecting something of them seeds that ain't natural. They grow in a big, fleshy mess of a squash.' I says, 'that rots and manures up the ground. And the seeds just lie on top, or get covered with such dirt as blows on 'em. They don't have to have no hole dug for 'em. But they do need soft earth and plenty of manure.' Well, I guess he thought I was an uneducated old fool that

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never heard of the scientific way of doing things. And he was pretty proud of the 'efficiency method' he'd thought up, so I come away and left him.

"But I kept an eye on that field just the same. Maybe I could learn suntuin'. But I see hardly any squash plants, so I inquired about it. It seemed that the seed was no good! That seemed kinder funny, for the handful of seeds I took out of the plantin' feller's bag grew all right in my garden. And it seemed queer that a scientific feller should be stuck with poor seed. But Louis didn't want to talk about it. He said it was poor seed, and an ignorant, uneducated cuss like me, should take his word for it. He replanted with other seed. But he didn't get no crop to amount to anything. And squashes was '[way?] out of sight that fall, too.

"So, if you are plantin' squashes, pick out some good, rich ground, and sock the fertilizer to it. Work it up in good shape so's there's a good soft seed bed. Then put yer seeds in a foot or so apart - just under the surface. And, if you want to hurry 'em up; plant 'em with the eyes up. When the plants get big enough so's the bugs won't kill 'em, clear 'em out so's they are a good four feet apart, and kind of work up the soil around 'em into hills. This helps the gound hold water - it won't run off the way it would if you let the ground bake hard. And it discourages the bugs and weeds. Don't do any monkeying with the plants that you can help. Just keep its enemies away from it. And, o'course, train it to go the way you want it to, so's it won't get stepped on accidental. But it's a good thing to remember that all plants like to grow towards the light, so if you can scheme it so that you want the plant to grow towards the south, you and the plant will prob'ly agree. And they won't be no trouble about trainin'.

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But don't forget that you can't make it grow into the shade. And if you've planted suntuin' to the south that casts a shadder, the plant will want to grow some other way.

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"Sure, you can sprinkle 'em with this and squirt 'em with that. But those things were mostly made to sell. You have good healthy plants, and the bugs don't stand much of a chance. It's the puny, sickly plants that the bugs finish.

"Yer know yer can train a squash vine to run up a chicken wire screen, and shade yer porch, if yer want. They got things to hang on with like porch vines have. But yer got to figger on taking the weight of the squashes off the vine with a piece of string, or suntin'. If yer don't they'll pull the vine down. They make real pleasant shade. And yer can look after the vine handy.

"I don't see why people fool so much with flowers, lay 'em out in beds and all that. Flowers has got to be sunthin' the wimmen can do. But the man raises the vegetables. Most men won't touch a flower bed 'cept to spade it. And women won't monkey with vegetables. I say that vegetables is just as good looking as flowers if you give 'em a chance. Dollard that lived up near me laid out what he called a 'formal garden', that was all vegetables. They was a bush squash in a round bed in the center, and all the other kinds of vegetables in different shaped beds all around. They was a border of string 5 beans one year. And chard, and beets. The tall vegetables was in back. Termatters on poles. And cucumbers and squash on chicken wire fences. He kept the grass mowed on the paths between the beds. And the beds cut out sharp and neat on the edges, like the vegetables was regular flowers. Warn't no weeds anywhere 'round. Yer see, that way the plants got what yer might call 'individual attention'. The way most farmers raise stuff is to be sure that they plant enough so's if the bugs eat up a few of the plants so that they die, they'll be enough left for what the farmer wants. That way, it takes a lot of land. And you most need a horse to plough and harrer and cultivate even a small garden. But Dollard's way, you raised just as much stuff, but 't warn't such hard work. Yer'd think more people would raise vegetables instead of flowers.

"Lots of people move in here thinkin' a home in the country is just what they want. They're anxious to raise stuff, and can it and have it for winter. But they don't know enough to even

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look after a lawn. They haven't been raised to it. They spend a lot of time on some dam bush, snipping here, and peckin' there. And first things you know the bush dies. They can't understand it. They've done everything they is to do. And the bush died. They don't know that Nature has a way of lookin' after growin' things herself. That you can do a lot to help Nature. But you can't go agin her - nor matter how good your intentions 6 is. You want to do most of your snipping in the spring or in the fall. You don't want to spend your summer at it, 'cept to take off dead or diseased stuff.

"They keep cuttin' their lawns, too. Cut the grass so dum short that the grass plants has to struggle for breath. They cut the lungs out of it 'most. And then they rake up all the grass they cut real careful, so's the roots don't have hardly any covering at all. And then they wonder how it happens that their lawns burn up in the hot sun when other people's don't. And how it happens that their grass winter kills. They talk about how much time they put in fussing with their lawns. And they get all discouraged. If a feller tries to tell 'em anything and help 'em out, they don't like what he says. He sounds like a lazy cuss to them when he tells 'em to leave the plants alone and give Nature a chance. Yer see, they want ter fuss. That's the way they've pictured living in the country was like. They've got their own ideas in their heads and 't ain't worth while to tell 'em better.

"I s'pose they have their troubles with us, too. When they do ask a question a feller can't believe his ears. He thinks they are trying to kid him. They ask questions such as we know the answers to ever since we knew anything. And the questions sound childish and silly. Sound as if the feller didn't have all his buttons. But maybe he's a city feller and all he had to play on when he was little was 7 Broadway, or Wall Street. He don't know that you have to rake a lawn even, 'cause the grass can't grow healthy under a lot of leaves. And the leaves is acid, too. When they rot they sour the ground, and weeds and sorrel and stuff like that grow instead of grass. And he don't know that you ought to take a lawn broom, that we call 'scratchers' and rake up the old twigs and stones and stuff that'll ketch in the mower. That, if you do that, you'll kill a lot of bugs and caterpillars that make their nests on 'em. If the grass is thin, then is the time to sow some grass seed - just before a rain. And

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run a roller over it afterwards. They don't even know that they's grass seed for shade and grass seed for sun. And then they don't want to let the grass get too long before mowing it. But they want to give it a chance to grow between mowings. And they want to leave the grass they cut off right where it falls. It is natural fertilizer for the grass when it rots, and what doesn't rot makes turf and keeps the sun off the growing roots. Yer can't tell a feller all that, for it depends. Maybe, if you was doing it yourself you wouldn't do it quite that way. You'd see that the soil was all run out. That you couldn't grow witch grass, let alone a lawn. Sheep manure is the best cure for that. And maybe, you'd fill in places with loom and seed it down. If yer stop to think, you'll realize that you've been all your life learning what you know. And you can't tell it to somebody who's a big executive, maybe, and fires 8 questions at yer. And expects yer to give him yer life's secrets in five minutes. You figger that if he don't know enough to grow grass, he probably ain't as smart as folks think he is. That he [may,?] know how to gyp people out of their money, or how to hang on to what his grandfather made. But that's about the limit of his intelligence. And that it is lucky fer him that he has that much, 'cause on his own power, he'd starve to death on the best farm in the country.

“Say, somebody ought to start a school, or somethin', for gentleman farmers. Teach 'em not to plant razzberries where the snow is going to slide off the roof onto 'em. And to build garages that their caretakers can get the cars out of in the winter without diggin' a tunnel, by G-! And a / lot of sensible things like that, that would make the country a better place to live in. Don't suppose the Government would consider it, do yer? I'll be seein' you.”

As quickly as he had arrived, Mr. Dunnell was on his way.